

CENSORSHIP NEWS



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CONNECTING THE DOTS

Book bans. Legislation restricting education. Heated school board elections. They're all connected. All aim to dictate what can be taught, discussed, and, ultimately, known. The rate of challenges to books in schools has quadrupled so far this school year. Legislative proposals that would previously have been deemed too radical are passing in state legislatures. School board members are bowing to political pressure to disregard established policies and procedures, or are threatened and harassed when they do not. Teachers and librarians are talked about as dangerous to students, rather than dedicated educational professionals. These tactics are succeeding too frequently. America's culture war threatens its entire education system and students are paying the price. Already, countless students across the country have had their access to diverse reading choices significantly curtailed. Education demands engagement with difficult ideas. Our future leaders are depending on us to ensure they are allowed to learn freely.

At the same time, a devastating war in Ukraine threatens to unravel thirty years of post-Cold War cultural exchange. There are better ways for cultural institutions to get involved than silencing Russian artists.

We must not allow free speech to become collateral damage.

NCAC LEADS COALITION STATEMENT ON ATTACK ON BOOKS IN SCHOOLS

In communities across the country, an organized political attack on books in schools threatens the education of America's children. These ongoing attempts to purge schools of books represent a partisan political battle fought in school board meetings and state legislatures. The undersigned organizations and individuals are deeply concerned about this sudden rise in censorship and its impact on education, the rights of students, and freedom of expression.

Nearly all communities have developed policies for both handling book challenges and allowing parents to influence their own child's reading, but they must do so within the guideposts set forth by the Supreme Court, without infringing on the rights of other students. The law clearly prohibits the kind of activities we are seeing today: censoring school libraries, removing books—and entire reading lists—based on disagreement with viewpoint and without any review of their educational or literary merit. Some would-be censors have gone even farther, threatening teachers, school librarians, authors, and school board members with criminal charges and even violence for allowing students access to books.

Libraries offer students the opportunity to encounter books and other material that they might otherwise never see and the freedom to make their own

choices about what to read. Denying young people this freedom to explore—often on the basis of a single controversial passage cited out of context—will limit not only what they can learn but who they can become.

Books help students connect with characters whose stories reflect their own lives. They also widen their view of a changing world that embraces diversity and multiculturalism. But there is always resistance to change. So it is not surprising that most of the books that are being attacked address concerns of groups previously underrepresented in libraries and school curriculums: books about lived experiences of racism or of growing up LGBTQIA and experiencing bias, discrimination, hate and even violence.

The First Amendment guarantees that no individual, group of individuals, legislator, community member, or even school board member can dictate what public school students are allowed to read based on their own personal beliefs or political viewpoint. It is freedom of expression that ensures that we can meet the challenges of a changing world. That freedom is critical for the students who will lead America in the years ahead. We must fight to defend it.

Over 1,000 signatories have joined NCAC.

NCAC LAUNCHES CENSORSHIP TRACKING TOOL

NCAC's new Youth Censorship Database and Map tracks threats to students' free expression rights across the country. The database includes book challenges in schools and libraries, as well as censorship of student art, journalism, and other types of student expression in schools. The database, available at ncac.org/map, aims to help students, school officials, policy-makers, parents and journalists better understand the threats to students' rights to access information in K-12 schools and libraries.



SHORT TAKES

Tennessee School District Bans Acclaimed Holocaust Novel *Maus*

In January 2022, the school board of McMinn County School District in Athens, Tennessee, removed acclaimed graphic novel *Maus* from the curriculum. *Maus* tells the story of author Art Spiegelman's parents in Auschwitz and was the centerpiece of the district's teaching about the Holocaust.

In a letter to the school board, NCAC urged the board to reverse the ban, noting its value as an educational resource. *Maus* is the only graphic novel ever to have won a Pulitzer Prize.

NCAC Objects to Removal of Student's LGBTQ Artwork in Georgia School

Officials at an elementary school in Athens, Georgia, removed student artwork celebrating gay rights. According to media reports, school officials compared the student's use of a rainbow flag to displaying a swastika in the classroom. This silencing of student expression is inconsistent with freedom of expression principles and violates the public school's First Amendment obligations. NCAC wrote to the Board of Education to urge the district to return the artwork to public display, apologize to the student and take steps to ensure that similar acts of art censorship do not occur in the future.

ACLU and NCAC Defend Public's Right to Information in *Project Veritas v. New York Times* Case

In December 2021, a New York state judge ordered the New York Times to turn over a legal document prepared by a lawyer for Project Veritas that it had used in reporting on the conservative advocacy group. The court also ordered the Times to stop reporting on the information contained in other Project Veritas documents. The Times is appealing those orders. NCAC joined ACLU and NYCLU in filing an amicus brief that argues the court's order imposes a prior restraint on the Times that infringes on both the freedom of the press and the right of the public to receive information.

FREE SPEECH AND THE WAR IN UKRAINE



Image by Ukrainian artist Vakulenko Y. Balance. 2021

In times of war, free speech suffers. Right and wrong appear indisputable. When we are convinced that the enemy is producing only dangerous lies and propaganda, we want to bar their entry into the marketplace of ideas.

The war between Russia and Ukraine is the latest test of our commitment to free speech. Vladimir Putin does not hesitate to censor his people, but Western democracies, and specifically the United States, are required to defend free speech. So far, Western governments are honoring their obligations. But major cultural players in the US and Europe are canceling Russian artists, performers and anything else coming from Russia.

Rather than banning artists associated with Putin, cultural institutions should support dissident cultural workers within Russia, as well as Ukrainian artists and institutions, by highlighting their work and offering them platforms to amplify their voices. Arts and other cultural institutions must not be complicit in allowing an iron curtain to fall on thirty years of open global cultural exchange.

Read the full statement at ncac.org.

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BOOK BAN TOWN HALL PRIORITIZES STUDENT VOICES

On February 28, 2022, NCAC and the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund hosted a virtual event to share strategies for defending the right to read and fighting censorship in schools. Student activists, banned authors, and free expression experts shared their valuable insights on how to fight book bans and inspire others to join the fight for free expression.

Students must be heard on this issue that so deeply affects their lives and their futures. NCAC was joined by students from York, Pennsylvania, and San Antonio, Texas, who are fierce advocates for the right to read in their communities. A recording of the event is available at ncac.org/events.

“We knew that if we weren’t the ones to take action, it would be hard for a change to happen.” - Edha Gupta, student activist

Meet the Students

Edha Gupta is a 17-year-old activist and senior at Central York High School. She spearheaded the advocacy campaign that led the Central York School Board to reverse their district-wide freeze on an anti-racist resource guide.

Lily Freeman is a transgender and Jewish activist and a member of the 2021-2022 GLSEN National Student Council Cohort. She works to help create more gender-inclusive and equitable school districts and communities.

Amanda Jennings is a senior at Ronald Reagan High School in San Antonio, Texas. She has been volunteering at her local library for several years. During a recent school board meeting, Amanda spoke out against pulling books from school libraries.

Olivia Pitusch is a 17-year-old activist, member of the LGBTQ+ community, and senior at Central York High School. In September, she worked alongside Edha and fellow members of the Panther Anti-Racist Union to reverse the Central York School Board’s district-wide freeze on a list of diversity resources.

Join the Fight with Student Advocates for Speech

Student Advocates for Speech (SAS) is a new national network of high school free speech clubs dedicated to empowering the next generation of leaders to advocate for freedom of expression as both a fundamental human right and a keystone of democracy.

In the pilot phase of the project, ten high school students will be recruited to start clubs in their schools to educate kids about the importance of free speech, assist them in defending their rights and promote the essential principles of free expression, including defending the rights of

people with whom they disagree.

NCAC will provide training and mentorship opportunities to help students advocate for their own speech and the speech of their fellow students, including fighting for the right to read, opposing school censorship and amplifying the voices of young people in democratic civic life.

More information about the program and how to apply is available at ncac.org/SAS. The deadline to apply for the 2022-2023 school year is May 6, 2022.